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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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The author of the following article is the Right Reverend George Sinker. Born in India of missionary parents, George Sinker returned after school and Oxford as a C.M.S. missionary to India, where he worked for thirty two years, the last five of them as Bishop of Nagpur. He resigned to make way for an Indian bishop, and returned to England to become assistant bishop of Derby. He is one of the two wardens of the Village Evangelists.

THE VILLAGE EVANGELISTS

The Village Evangelists are the youngest but certainly among the most active of evangelistic agencies in the Church of England to-day, and after barely nine years have already made themselves felt throughout the length and breadth of the country.

Who are they? The Village Evangelists cannot truly be called an organization, for although they are a very active body of consecrated men and women, they have next to no organization at all. Some of them meet once a year in January for retreat and conference, otherwise they only meet on active service. They have a chairman for their annual conference, two wardens to give counsel and advice, and a correspondent, who under God, holds the whole thing together in a quite marvellous way, makes all our plans, chooses the teams and sends us into action. It is difficult to compute our numbers for they are always increasing. The last time I made a definite enquiry there were about five hundred clergymen and four hundred lay men and women.

We were founded at the end of the last war by two saints of God of very different types -- Brother Edward, a modern St. Francis, and Walter Carey, late Bishop of Bloemfontein in South Africa. To them both came the vision that Britain was starving for the power, the joy and the light of the good news of Jesus Christ, and that the villages of England and Wales were the key to the whole position. So, in prayer and under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit and without any elaborate organization, they set to work to build up an effective Christian commando force to win the country back to God. Both these two great men have gone to their reward, but although followed by a lesser breed, the Holy Spirit is as active as ever among us who have seen their vision and are trying to carry on their work.

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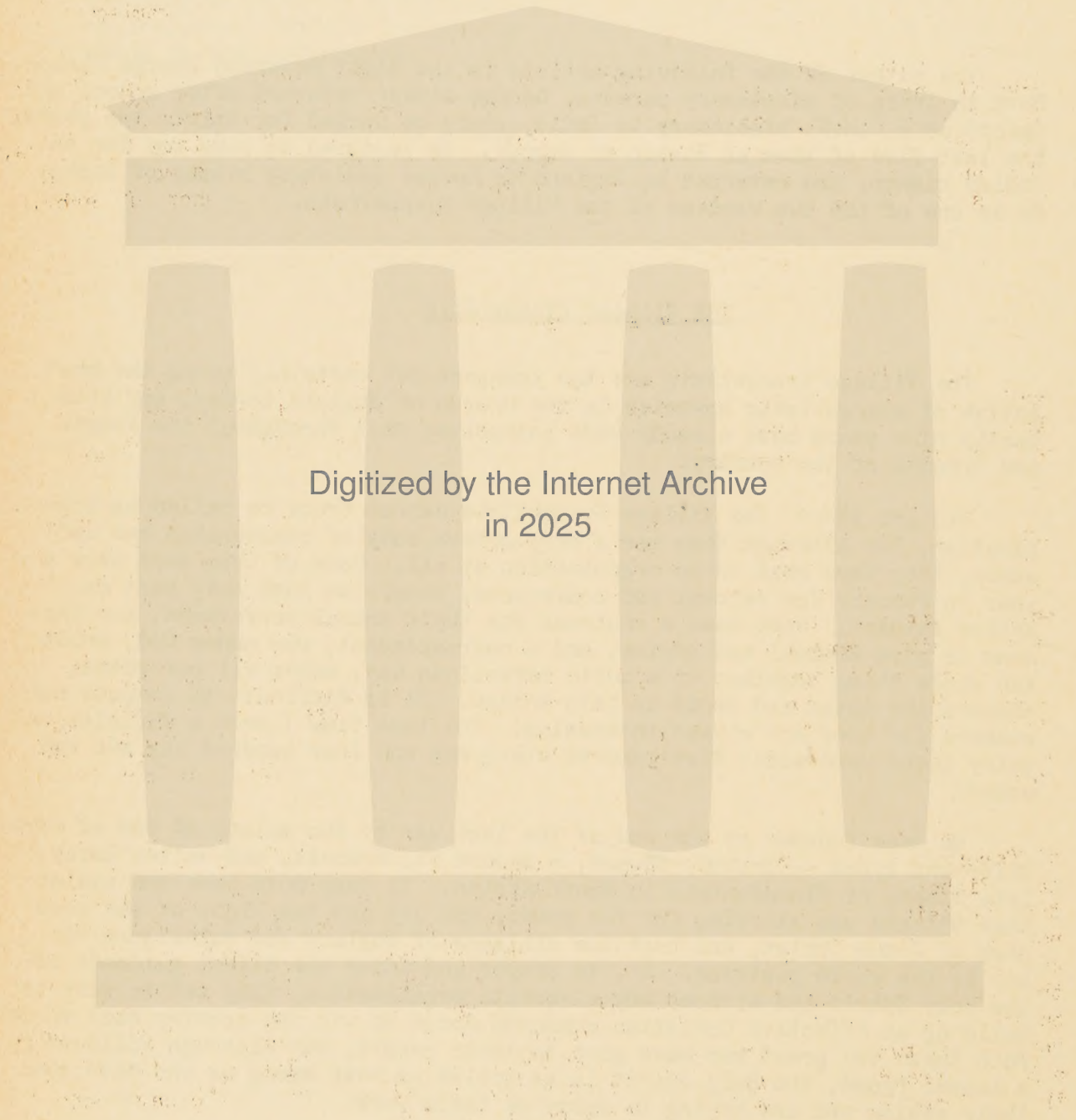

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This work is done through parish missions, but despite the lack of organization, the pattern has become fairly clear. We invariably wait for invitations, the initiative always comes from the parishes, but we already get more than we can immediately accept. Nowadays we rarely have to undertake an individual parish mission, for the invitation generally comes from a rural deanery. Either the whole deanery, or a group of contiguous parishes within the deanery invite us to conduct parish missions during the same week. The missions themselves are entirely separate, but the team-work within the deanery and among the missioners is all to the good. It generally starts with an invitation to speak to a Diocesan Council or a Ruri-decanal Chapter in order to explain ourselves. Sometimes some of the incumbents are a little suspicious of us, but they are generally caught up in the long run by the enthusiasm of their brethren, the invitation comes, and the preparation within the parishes begins. This may go on for as much as a year, though seldom longer, and in the meantime missioners are allotted to each parish. We have a very wide selection within the Village Evangelists, and have never failed to supply the particular colour of churchmanship required in any parish. In most country parishes the team consists of one priest missioner and two lay missioners, though in larger parishes we deploy larger teams. In my last parish mission I had a magnificent team of a dozen lay missioners.

During the year of preparation the missioner makes a contact in the parish to which he is coming as missioner, either by letter or preferably in person, though the actual preparation is entirely the concern of the incumbent and his flock. The mission itself occupies a forthnight. The lay missioners arrive on the first Saturday, and after being commissioned, either by the rural dean or the incumbent, set to work to visit every house in the village, and prepare the ground by conversation and literature, and so try to build up a real spirit of expectation throughout the parish. On the following Saturday the priest missioners arrive, and are commissioned in some central church by the bishop himself or his assistant. It is essential that everyone understands that the mission is being conducted at the invitation and with the good-will of the authorities. For this reason the priest missioners are generally commissioned again by the vicar himself at the first morning service on Sunday.

During the second week the priest missioner takes over, and in a series of mission addresses tries to re-interpret the Christian message and make it relevant to the life and circumstances of the parish and its members. He will hold himself ready to meet, talk with and pray with anyone, and will be guided in his own visiting by his lay missioners. At the end of the week many missioners arrange a question hour which may be of the greatest value. On the final Sunday evening some missioners ask for decisions, but this is a matter he will discuss with the incumbent. Every day of the mission begins with a communion service, and the missioners meet for conference and prayer every morning after breakfast, and by being sensitive to the Spirit may alter their plan of campaign at any time. The missioners stay in various homes by invitation during the mission, and are invited out to practically all meals -- sometimes rather a problem, for everyone puts on the best they can and Village Evangelists are in danger of getting overfed!

The most important part of a Village Evangelists mission is the follow up. This is left entirely in the hands of the incumbent and his Parochial Church Council, or its mission committee, with the help and advice - if invited - of the missioner. Prayer groups, study groups, confirmation classes,

rendezvous for all and sundry. It was a centre of purpose, joy and mirth, and the making of many new friendships. Tea seemed to be going on all the time. It is good to see how the dear Lord uses tea to forward His purposes of love! Something had happened in the parish, -- a new awakening, a new depth and breadth in the Church of God in Hampstead. Things will return to normal, but it will be a new normal, a little nearer individually and in fellowship, to the heart of God.

The Village Evangelists are an entirely Anglican group, but a growing ecumenical sense is awakening among them. There is nearly always a great measure of co-operation and sympathy during our parish missions with the local clergy and members of the Free Churches. At our last annual conference the whole matter was brought up, and it is to be definitely on the agenda of our next conference. Some of us would like to go a little faster in this direction, but we recognize that the Village Evangelist movement is of such value that it must not be jeopardized by a too hasty change of policy. Suffice it to say that we have, one and all, "seriously laid to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions."